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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000073

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2018

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BO

SUBJECT: MORE DELAYS WITH UNIFIED OPPOSITION SLATE OF CANDIDATES

REF: A. MINSK 017

1B. MINSK 061 AND PREVIOUS

1C. 07 MINSK 1035

1D. 07 MINSK 976

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

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11. (C) The United Democratic Forces' (UDF) drafting of a unified slate of candidates for 2008 parliamentary elections remains a work in progress. A host of factors, including internal Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) elections and the recent 15-day detention of United Civic Party Chair Anatoliy Lebedko, have conspired to delay this process. Lebedko recently told DCM that only 63 of 110 candidates have been determined, and publicly opined that the UDF might have to start from scratch. BPF First Deputy Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka told Pol/Econ Chief that he now hopes the list will be completed "by March." The release of political prisoners, a most welcome shot in the arm for the opposition, could nevertheless delay the process even further. With Belarus' Central Election Commission discussing September 28 as a likely election day, the completion of the unified slate becomes all the more urgent. End summary.

Targets for Formation of a Unified Slate Continue to Slip

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12. (C) Self-imposed UDF targets for the completion of a unified candidate slate continue to slip. In meetings in mid-January, UDF Co-Chairs Sergey Kalyakin (Belarusian Party of Communists, BPC) and Anatoliy Levkovich (Belarusian Social Democratic Party-Gramada, BSDP-G) both noted that progress was being made on the list, and expressed optimism that it could be complete by a meeting of the UDF's Political Council to be held February 3. In a subsequent meeting, UDF Co-Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka (Belarusian Popular Front, BPF) was also guardedly optimistic, but noted problems, particularly in Mogilyov region. Vyachorka told Pol/Econ Chief that, realistically, the list could be ready "by March." In a January 30 conversation with DCM, UDF Co-Chair Anatoliy Lebedko (United Civic Party, UCP) said that roughly 60 of 110 candidates had been agreed, and that the UDF was considering running all released political prisoners as candidates. (Note: Press sources quoted Lebedko shortly after this meeting as saying that he UDF might need to begin the candidate selection process again. End note.)

Grodno, Mogilyov Regions Continue to Present Problems

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¶3. (C) Evaluating progress made on the slate from region to region, Vyachorka told Poloff that the highest amount of consensus had been reached over the city of Minsk and Minsk region. Mogilyov region, once seen as a potential bright spot in the candidate selection process, has been stymied by personality conflicts on the local level, according to several UDF sources. Grodno region continues to present some of the most intractable problems, with local "For Freedom" representatives thought likely to propose their own list outside of the UDF. UCP's Lebedko told DCM that the UDF is prepared to work with FF Deputy Chair Yuriy Gubarevich to include FF candidates on the UDF list for Grodno, but that the coalition could not accept an ultimatum from any side.

Positive and Negative Factors Slow the Work

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¶4. (C) A number of factors have managed to slow the process of list formation. Leadership elections within the BPF were held December 8-9, but the impact of these elections on the UDF was not fully clear until one month later, when the BPF's Soim, its policy making body, confirmed that Vyachorka would continue to represent the party as a UDF Co-Chair. The 15-day detention of UDF Co-Chair Lebedko following the January 10 entrepreneurs' demonstration also delayed the UDF Presidium's work in the candidate selection process (ref A). The release of political prisoners, while welcome news and long a demand of the opposition, also could slow the candidate selection process, due to the consideration of former political prisoners as candidates and due to the effect the release of the BSDP-G's Aleksandr Kozulin could have on the UDF leadership structure (ref B).

¶5. (C) Grodno region notwithstanding, representatives of

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Aleksandr Milinkevich's "For Freedom" (FF) movement seem to be taking a more active role in UDF affairs. Vyachorka told Pol/Econ Chief that FF Deputy Chair Viktor Korniyenko was participating regularly in the work of the UDF Presidium and FF would run a campaign for free and fair elections with the UDF. Vyachorka added that no mature politicians were currently discussing boycotting the polls. The BPC's Kalyakin and BSDP-G's Levkovich both indicated that Nikolay Statkevich and his Belarusian Social Democratic Party-Narodnaya Gramada could attempt to form an alternate opposition slate and/or call for a boycott.

Comment

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¶6. (C) Representatives of Belarus' Central Election Commission have already stated that September 28 is the likely date for this year's parliamentary polls, so it is already past time for the UDF to have completed its unified slate. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that the selection process will be finished by the February 3 meeting of the UDF's Political Council. Vyachorka's March timeframe seems more plausible. While the delays may be understandable, they already place the ability of the UDF to lead a robust campaign at risk.

STEWART